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A Centenary

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A CENTENARY

On Thursday, June 1, 1876, Pope Pius IX signed the decree introducing the cause of Father Libermann, giving him the right to the title "Venerable". The news were received with great joy throughout the Congregation and especially at the Mother House. Very Reverend Father Ignatius Schwindenhammer, the Superior General, and his Council decided to celebrate the event with a solemn triduum, the 14th, 15th and 16th of July. We would like to recall this celebration, basing ourselves on the account found in the *General Bulletin*, Vol. X, 1874-77, pp. 796 ff.

The Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Guibert, gave his authorization with pleasure and even accepted the invitation to preside at the closing ceremony, accompanied by his co-adjutor, the future Cardinal Richard. The Papal Nuncio to Paris, Mgr. Meglia, also agreed to take part in the ceremony.

There were eminent preachers present. For the most solemn event of all, the one on July 16, Bishop Pie of Poitiers and Bishop de Ladoue of Nevers were prevented from coming by other duties or by bad health. But one of the most famous orators of the day, Bishop Freppel of Angers, promised to come. He was a compatriot of the Venerable Father and had occasion to meet him personally. His eloquence drew a very large crowd. . .

As preachers for the first two days, they invited Father Sainte-Colombe and Father Simonis. The former had been a professor at the Holy Ghost Seminary and had been a member of the Congregation even before the Fusion. He had worked in Guadeloupe and in Martinique where he became Vicar-General. Even though he left the Congregation in 1853, he remained very devoted to it. He had known Father Libermann well. The latter, an Alsatian and a cousin of Father

Schwindenhammer, was then Director of the Sisters of Niederborn. He was elected to the Berlin Parliament. In 1863, he had written a pamphlet "Alsace and the Mission to the Blacks", which contributed to the constant flow of vocations from that Province.

Many invitations were sent out. First of all to Bishop Roess of Strassburg who had played an important role in the career of Father Libermann by ordaining him sub-deacon and opening his way to the priesthood, thus fulfilling the condition laid down by the Holy See for the approval of the "Work for the Blacks". He wrote, in answer to his invitation: "I promise to take part in your Solemn Triduum with the sincere hope that nothing will prevent me from doing so. May God grant me the grace, which I don't deserve, of not feeling too much the weight of my 82 years". The Bishop took the occasion to name Father Simonis an honorary canon of the Cathedral of Strassburg. Also invited were Bishop Delannoy of Bourbon, Admiral Fourichon, Minister of the Navy, and many other important persons, both ecclesiastical and civilian.

The ceremonies of the first two days were in the Chapel of the Mother House which, thanks to the zeal of Mr. Eugene (brother of the Superior General), the seminarians and the Brothers, had been decorated with tapestries, banners and garlands, giving it an unusually festive appearance, – all with a truly gracious effect (*Given the taste of the epoch, one is permitted some doubts*).

But, for the solemn closing of the Triduum, the chapel would not be nearly big enough. The Church of Our Lady of Victories, so dear to the Congregation, was too far away. There was nearby the Church of St. Genevieve (what is now the Pantheon), – "but would it not detract from the spirit of simplicity proper to a family feast to go and celebrate in such a grand edifice"? Father Bernard, who had been notary for the first investigation of the life of the Venerable Father and was also Vice-Dean of St. Genevieve, argued that this was the only church suitable "for the eloquent Bishop of Angers, who would have there a pulpit worthy of him, for the large crowd who would come to hear him, and for the eminent prelates who would honor the ceremony with their presence...". He won his point. It is intriguing to think that the humble Libermann was honored in that same Pantheon which, since it has been turned over to purely lay auspices,

shelters the remains of so-called great men whose reputation is not immune from suspicion!

On July 14, Father Sainte-Colombe opened the series of sermons with a remarkable talk on the principal accomplishments of Our Venerable Father: the mission to the Blacks in Africa and in the Colonies. He exalted him not only with the authority of an eye-witness, but also with the sentiments of a heart full of filial devotion: "First he sketched the way in which Providence, in its admirable plan, had chosen and prepared the son of the rabbi of Saverne as an instrument of divine mercy for the poor Blacks, by making him suffer crosses and contradictions of every description. Then he painted a picture of the work done by the man of God for the accomplishment of his great mission: the evangelization of the Blacks in the colonies, the renewal of the old Society of the Holy Ghost by a providential fusion with the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, the erection of the colonial bishoprics with the consequent founding of the African Missions, etc. . . .".

The next day it was Father Simonis' turn. The deputy for Alsace, recently torn away from France, could not fail to awaken a special sympathy. "Taking his text from St. Paul *"nihil gloriabor nisi in infirmitatibus meis"*, he brought out in a striking manner the contrast to be found throughout the career of the Servant of God: trials and tribulations of every kind, physical, spiritual and moral, and at the same time admirable results, and a constant growth in virtue, grace and holiness, both for himself and especially for the salvation of the unhappy children of Cham". (That's how they spoke in those days!).

Finally the great day came. In the imposing Church of St. Genevieve, filled with more than 3,500 people, the closing ceremony of the Triduum was presided over by the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, surrounded by the Nuncio, several prelates and more than 300 ecclesiastics. In the crowd there were many representatives of the civil authorities, of the clergy of the city and of religious congregations of men and women. It could be seen how, less than 25 years after his death, the influence of the Venerable Father had spread and deepened, and how his memory remained alive, for a good number of those present could have met him and appreciated his worth.

"The Bishop of Anger fulfilled the expectations of his audience in every respect. For an hour and a half he held them hanging on his lips". His sermon was printed in the newspapers of the city and published as a pamphlet and sent to all the communities. It is to be found in Volume V of the *Pastoral Works and Orations of Bishop Freppel*, II, pp. 148-181. It is superb! It is written in a French style no longer to be found... We will quote only a few extracts.

The preacher began by explaining that every century has two histories: the surface one, and the spiritual one which is the real one. It is to the latter one that the life of Father Libermann belongs.

"The strength of the simple man is to follow the way of the Lord" (Prov. X, 29). "That way traced for him by God Father Libermann followed with the simplicity of a child. He followed it through the trials which initiated him into his mission. He followed it in the midst of the work which was the object of that mission. Whether making preparations or striking out in action, he only obeyed the grace which was the guiding compass of his life. This will be the whole substance of what I propose to say in memory of the Servant of God, Francis Mary Paul Libermann...".

"It is a great honor to have been able to touch the hand of a Saint, to have heard his voice and heard the beating of his heart. It is a double honor to have been united to him by the bonds of a common fatherland. You have added to our memories of the distant past by choosing this church which, more than any other, speaks to our hearts and in which it is good to celebrate the exaltation of the humble. From the very top of its dome it repeats day and night the verse from the Virgin's Canticle: "Qui potens est... exaltavit humiles".

There followed a beautiful description of Christian Alsace and of that race, "both religious and warlike, a race of missionaries and of soldiers". The preacher then mentioned the current movement of conversions among the Alsatian Jews, especially under the influence of Liebermann the theologian and Bautain the philosopher. Then he praised the Sulpicians who had welcomed Venerable Libermann. "Never has the idea of the priest as a man of duty and of sacrifice been better understood than by the illustrious company which inherits the name and the spirit of Father Olier... This cleric in disgrace, whose infirmities keep him away from Holy Orders, this willing porter who puts himself

at the service of all, only too happy to be useful in the humblest task, – here he is, the very soul of a house where are recruited the elite of the clergy of France. They gather round him. They listen to him speak about God, the Blessed Virgin, Jesus in the Eucharist, with a charm beyond telling. He does not know the science of theology. He has no human eloquence. He knows less than most of those around him. It doesn't matter! There is something in his voice which affects them, something in his heart which calls to them. 'Have you heard that little Jew talk about God' That is the cry of admiration which makes the rounds. Soon recreation is turned into a pious exercise, with hearts opening up in love for one another. Walks become pilgrimages to some oratory or sanctuary. Throughout the whole group of young priests there is a movement of fervor which affects even the most luke-warm. It is a fruitful activity, whose effect is still felt in the Paris Seminary. In the Provinces, we noticed in our houses long afterwards the salutary influence of that apostolate which goes back to the humble catechist at Issy. . . .

Referring to Libermann's work with the Eudists, Bishop Freppel adds: "After having studied at the school of Father Olier the rules of the interior life, he went to Father Eudes to find in the Heart of Jesus the flame of the apostolate. . . . He possessed in a high degree the ability to discover a vocation in the struggles of an indecisive and troubled spirit. He had that clear vision which can read the depths of a soul, really understand its condition and see its needs; that wise discretion and prudent reserve which avoids imposing itself upon someone's conscience but leaves it open to the free action of God; that sympathy for the weak which never pushes them harshly toward spiritual improvement but leads them gently, step by step, without too much effort or argument; that firmness which knows how to cut to the quick, give a few sharp blows to rebellious nature and throw the person into the arms of God. In him, all this was less a natural gift than the fruit of grace, whose light penetrated his intelligence and communicated to him a knowledge higher than any human science, the science of the saints. . . .". Let us recognize that rarely has anyone better described the type of spiritual direction practiced by the Venerable Father.

With regard to Africa, the Bishop of Angers shares the ideas and the manner of speaking of his time. . . . as did Father

Libermann also. He does not fail to speak of the "unhappy children of Cham", and of the curse which seems to rest upon them. He adds: "Islam has come to touch them, but only to mingle its own darkness and corruption with what they already had in abundance".

But then he immediately says: "What! my brethren, is there in the great human family any portion which is disinherited for all time? God forbid! . . . Here we have the Lord raising up the man destined to organize the apostolate of the Blacks. . . To the call from on high, the Servant of God will respond with the simplicity of the man who puts his strength in following faithfully the voice of the Lord. . . Henceforth, as a sign of divine blessing, obstacles fall before him, his infirmities leave him for good, the long-awaited grace of the priest-hood comes to more than fulfil his desires, a whole company of zealous and devoted young men line up to follow him and, all together, write the name of Mary on the title page of their work. Yes, the name of Mary, of Her to whom Jesus Christ from the Cross gave as children all men without exception. It was the Queen of Martyrs who was going to extend her sceptre over pagan Africa. It was the Virgin Mary who was going to make the most abandoned of her sons feel the effect of her adoption. It was in the Immaculate Heart that the new apostles were going to look for the model of sacrifice. . .".

Speaking of the founding of the Congregation, the preacher made the following observations: "Alongside the powerfully established Orders, there is room for another form of religious life, in which the constant search for individual perfection makes up for the less severe requirements of the common life. Father Libermann had understood very well the conditions of this form of life. Hence the care he took to put the principle of renunciation in so prominent a place. Hence his zeal to make the spirit of faith and of interior prayer be abundantly present in his sons. Hence his constant effort to establish in them a reserve of habitual recollection which could sustain them in all the external situations of their life. Hence that holy energy with which he tries to kill in his disciples everything that is purely terrestrial, in order to build up the edifice of priestly holiness on the ruins of fallen nature and carnal man. . .".

After all that, Bishop Freppel made a rapid sketch of the accomplishments of the young Congregation under the mo-

mentum given by its founder: the mission in Africa, the Fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, the spiritual conferences which gathered together men like Bishop de Segur, the historian Rohrbacher, the future Cardinal Gousset, Dom Pitra (also a future Cardinal), the canonist Bouix, Father Gauthier who put at their disposition the library he had collected at the Mother House. "That was, my friends, one of the great episodes in the history of our times. I am not afraid to say that, along with the Abbey of Solmesnes, the Holy Ghost Seminary, as Father Libermann established and transformed it, was one of the principal centers of the restoration of Roman teaching. . .". Then, speaking of the foundation of the French Seminary: "It was not without the particular plan of Providence, always admirable in its ways, that so exalted a mission was associated with the most obscure of apostolates, as if to draw attention to the fact that humility is the condition and the safeguard of true science. . .".

In conclusion, the prelate expressed his wish for "the dispersed tribes of Israel", for the conversion of Africa, for Catholic Alsace and for the young Congregation, addressing to God a fervent prayer that these wishes might soon come true. He closing words were: "In this century, when men are as weak as their works, what a joy it is to be able to see simple and upright souls who have sought all their strength in God and have left behind them establishments all the more durable as their origins were obscure. . . Through all this pell-mell of events which attract so much attention and merit so little, God does His work, the Church accomplishes her mission, souls are sanctified, the book of the elect is filling up hour by hour, the eternal destiny of humanity is being prepared. That is the meaning of history, as it appears in the life of God's servants, as a light, a hope, and a strength. . .".

After Solemn Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the ceremony ended with a joyful Te Deum. In the evening, dinner was served in the community for the principal personages. "When the meal was over, night had fallen. The white statue of Our Lady (*Tutela Domus*), flood-lit by the Brothers, looked very imposing at the front of the house and seemed to be presiding over this family celebration".

A triduum of thanksgiving was also celebrated on July 17, 18 and 19 in the community of the Holy Heart of Mary at Chevilly. The same was done at Beauvais, at the head-quarters of the Archconfraternity of St. Joseph, and at the convents of

the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in Paris and in Thiais. Similar ceremonies took place in all our communities. The Catholic Press wrote it all up. There was a flood of letters of felicitation. . .

The enthusiasm which these observances awakened in the Congregation made it seem likely that the cause of the Venerable Father, thus begun, would be actively pursued and that we would not have long to wait for a happy outcome. One hundred years have gone by. . . If things have advanced a little, the end is not yet in sight. . . Why? . . . Father Libermann is not working miracles? . . . No doubt, but perhaps there is reason to wonder if we are not somewhat to blame, and to examine our conscience. . .

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